

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Classics and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture by Ching-I Tu

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The overall picture that Cook paints is of a complex society, or set of interrelated societies, wrestling with profound ethical issues. A broad uniformity characterizes the doctrinal discourse, but Cook exposes its many fissures and allows us to see the rich history and diverse humanity woven through it. This complexity is unsurprising to anyone familiar with Islamic history, but it comes as a timely reminder at a point in history when even scholars who know better have been reduced to platitudes about the peaceful nature of all Islam. Such rhetoric may be useful and necessary in our current climate, but perhaps the reduction of Islam to a monolithic antipode to Western modernity (regardless of who is doing the reducing) is better countered through the kind of clearheaded exploration of Islamic thought and history that Cook successfully undertakes here.
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TU, CHING-I, ed. *Classics and Interpretation: The Hermeneutic Traditions in Chinese Culture*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2000. xiv+468 pp. $49.95 (cloth).

The present volume is the outcome of an international conference held at Rutgers University in October 1996 under the rubric of hermeneutics and Chinese studies. In many ways, this was an innovative move in Chinese studies, or sinology, which is not only a small and marginal field within the academic world of U.S. universities but also often self-enclosed, a narrow circle compartmentalized in its various subdivisions of specialties. At the Rutgers conference, however, hermeneutics served as a common theme that brought together specialists who usually do not meet and discuss general issues, and the theoretical concerns of hermeneutic questions made it inevitable for them to move beyond their specialties to find some points of convergence in the discussion of issues of reading, understanding, and interpretation. Unlike many other theoretical approaches in Western scholarship, hermeneutics is not, at least as Hans Georg Gadamer argued in his major work *Truth and Method* (1960), a set of ready-made methodological rules one may simply apply to whatever text under discussion but a conscious effort at understanding the nature of understanding itself. It thus provides a common ground for the discussion of reading and interpretation without turning all discussions into repetitive exercises following certain protocols of a critical approach. European hermeneutics has developed on the basis of biblical exegesis and scholarship in classical Greco-Roman studies, with a special focus on the issue of canon and commentaries, and that is eminently comparable with the situation in China where there is also a long tradition of commentary on Confucian classics and other canonical texts. That may explain why students of Chinese history, philosophy, religion, and literature often find hermeneutics a suitable point of connection not only among China specialists but also between Chinese studies and other academic disciplines.

The book under review is divided into seven parts, covering a wide range of topics. The first part is devoted to a classical Confucian text, *Great Learning* (500–200 B.C.E.), the second to questions of canonicity and Confucian orthodoxy, the third to readings of Confucian classics in political contexts, the fourth to the Song dynasty Confucian scholar Zhu Xi and his legacy, the fifth to reading of literary texts and Taoist canon and to the influence of Buddhism on interpretation of certain Confucian classics, the sixth to Ming-Qing reinterpretation of Confucianism, and the seventh to contemporary interpretation of Confucian culture. It is clear from

this list that reading of Confucian classics in various time periods occupies much of the space in this book, and this is not surprising given the predominant influence of Confucianism in traditional Chinese culture and the fact that Confucianism is the most widely studied subject in Western sinology. Most chapters dealing with Confucianism have made some effort at relating the usual kind of sinological scholarship to hermeneutics as a theoretical framework. In discussing the emergence of *Great Learning* as a crucial canonical text during the Song dynasty and its subsequent fate in the Ming and Qing dynasties, for example, Kai-wing Chow provides a list of interpretive strategies ranging from "sanctioned change" to "fabrication," ways in which Confucian scholars tried to establish the canonicity of the text or to contest its canonical status. In the light of hermeneutic considerations, Chow is able to draw some theoretical conclusions from the study of historical specifics, pointing out, for example, the close relationship between textual criticism and what he calls "hermeneutical principles," the changing situation of canon formation and different interpretations in the context of changed historical conditions. In comparing Confucian classics with canonical texts in other traditions, John B. Henderson identifies three major theoretical issues as "touchstones" of the Neo-Confucian orthodoxy during the Song and Ming dynasties, namely, the questions of human nature, the unified principle and its multiple manifestations, and the "sixteen-character transmission" of the Tao. He suggests that the reason why these issues became important "touchstones" for Neo-Confucianism lies in the fact that "they expressed or at least impinged on principles of general philosophical significance that philosophers in any highly developed intellectual tradition should recognize and consider" (p. 80). Confucianism became firmly established as intellectual orthodoxy in 136 B.C.E., when Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty made five Confucian classics the only sanctioned texts of "official learning," while excluding all other schools of ancient thought from such official recognition. In his discussion of this historical process of official sanction and imperial sponsorship, Yen-ren Tsai shows how the Confucian "scriptural" authority was strengthened by the emperor's political authority and remarks that "this political dimension has stood as a peculiar feature ever since" (p. 101). Tsai makes a persuasive case of the canonization of Confucian classics in the Han, but the nature of these classics as "scripture" in a religious sense remains unclear in his historical discussion.

Hermeneutics as politics is also the topic of several other essays in this collection. Sarah Queen discusses the crucial role played by Dong Zhongshu in the canonization of Confucian classics in the Han, and she argues that it was Dong's interpretation of the Confucian idea of the role of the ruler that "gave rise to new patterns of political authority and power that came to define the traditional state" (p. 190). Chün-chieh Huang revisits the debate over *Mencius* during the Song dynasty, particularly the political issues involved in Wang Anshi's use of *Mencius* for institutional reform, and points out the "politicization of Confucianism" as an unfortunate result (p. 206). Huang goes on to make a general statement that "the Chinese historical phenomenon of hermeneutics as politics has rarely been seen elsewhere in the world" (p. 208). Without detailed discussion, however, this remains an unsubstantiated claim, and one wonders how Huang might respond to such works as Stanley Rosen's *Hermeneutics as Politics* (Oxford, 1987). Young-tsu Wong reflects on Kang Youwei's use of New Script *Gongyang* Confucianism in the late Qing dynasties and offers yet another discussion of the relationship between hermeneutics and politics. As Wong observes, Kang was not really interested in pure exegesis of the Confucian texts, but "he found that its exegetical tradition

illuminated the great principles of 'institutional change' (*gaizhi*)" (p. 388). "Kang's project of political reform was a total failure, and the outcome of his revisionist reading of Confucian classics, says Wong, "ended up helping to open the floodgate of anti-Confucian radicalism in modern China" (p. 405).

Owing to the limited space of a short review, it is impossible to cover all the chapters, significant points, and insights one may find in this book. Many issues raised in the book need further exploration, some of the claims made in its chapters are debatable, even questionable, and, more important, hermeneutics as a theory needs much more in-depth discussion, but all in all this book represents a serious attempt at rethinking Chinese studies in the light of hermeneutic theory, and it is therefore of interest to scholars in Chinese studies and the comparative study of Chinese and Western philosophy and cultural traditions.

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BLACKBURN, ANNE M. *Buddhist Learning and Textual Practice in Eighteenth-Century Lankan Monastic Culture.* Buddhisms: A Princeton University Press Series. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001. x+248 pp. $39.50 (cloth).

Anne M. Blackburn's book detailing the rise of a new Buddhist monastic order in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka is an impressive accomplishment. Through careful historical and textual analysis, she locates the writing of commentaries on canonical Pāli literature in the local Sinhala language within a broader historical framework. She sets out to demonstrate that the eighteenth-century Buddhist "reform" engineered by the monk Väliviṭa Saraṇaṃkara was an innovative development that grew out of the practices and discourse surrounding monastic texts. We learn that the monks of the order called the Siyam Nikāya founded by Saraṇaṃkara imagined themselves to be reviving Buddhism through the introduction of a centralized monastic curriculum and discursive claims that linked the vitality of the tradition to institutions of monastic learning. At the same time, Blackburn argues that the emphasis that scholars place on the postcolonial transformation of religious traditions has in the case of Sri Lankan Buddhism occluded precolonial efforts to construct "tradition."

While views of decline and revival in the history of Buddhism are common in scholarly writings, Blackburn shows us that this approach oversimplifies the various social and historical factors at work behind religious change. Terms like "decline" and "revival" are rhetorically inflected to ascribe the illusion of objectivity to particular views of the world advanced by specific interests. In the case of Saraṇaṃkara and his Siyam Nikāya, we learn that these monks and their supporters promoted the view that they were responsible for resuscitating Buddhism from centuries of disarray. Blackburn describes how the use of texts helped this vision to become normative in the Kandyan kingdom of eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. Saraṇaṃkara and his disciples instituted a monastic curriculum that stressed a fairly uniform code of study and practice, and then they extolled the values of learning and linguistic skill around which they organized their identity. In a manner reminiscent of Pierre Bourdieu's discussion of the symbolic capital of the modern educational system, Blackburn notes how social status and a vision of monastic legitimacy were constructed out of the prestige accorded to learning. The mastery of particular texts and the technical skills used to interpret and compose literary works endowed the Siyam Nikāya with a high stature in the kingdom,